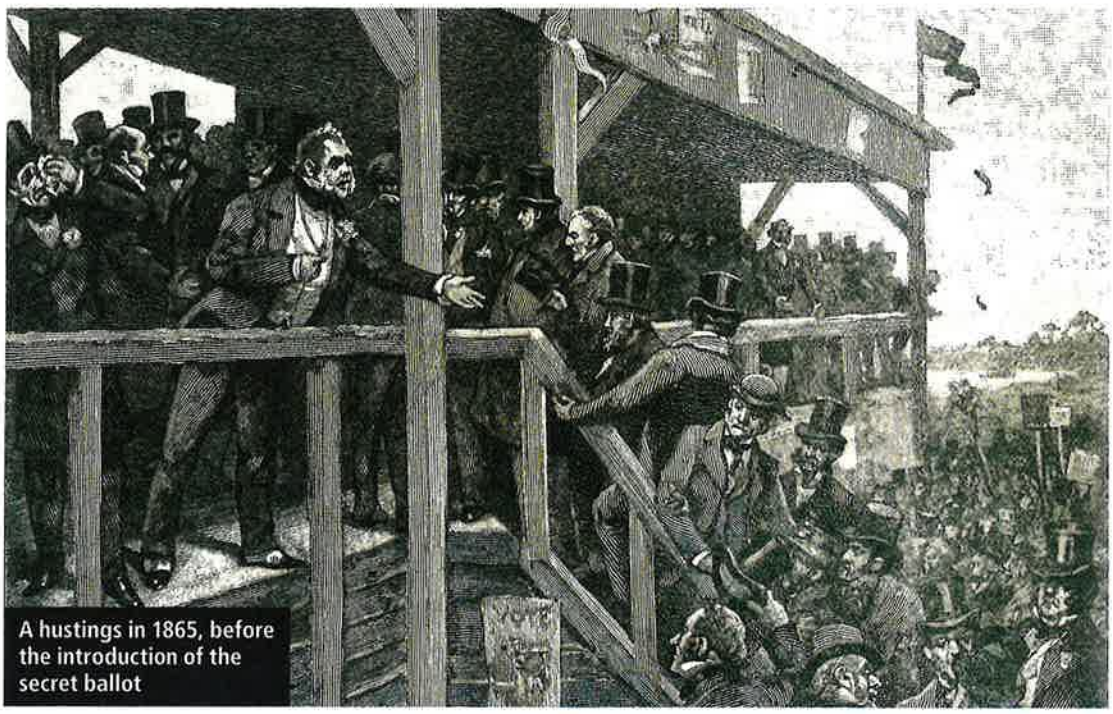
Nineteenth-century electoral reform

Philip Salmon



A hustings in 1865, before the introduction of the secret ballot

Victorian changes to the voting system gave us democracy as we know it today. But what did they take away?

Exam links

AQA 1F Industrialisation and the people: Britain, c.1783–1885

AQA 1G Challenge and transformation: Britain, c.1851–1964

Edexcel paper 1 option D Britain 1785–1870: democracy, protest and reform

Edexcel paper 3 option 36.1 Protest, agitation and parliamentary reform in Britain, 1780–1928

OCR Y140/Y110 From Pitt to Peel: Britain 1783–1853

OCR Y141/Y111 Liberals, Conservatives and the rise of Labour, 1846–1918

Historians traditionally view the electoral reforms of the nineteenth century — particularly the extension of voting rights — as key milestones in Britain's progress towards full democracy. But was the electoral system that these reforms replaced really so unrepresentative? This article unearths evidence of an alternative type of democracy at work in mid-Victorian Britain, which our modern emphasis on universal suffrage has tended to overlook.

The road to democracy

It is easy to see why the nineteenth century is traditionally regarded as the 'road to democracy'. During this period Britain's voting system underwent fundamental change, at a pace and on a scale never witnessed before (or since). By 1885 most of the key features associated with modern parliamentary elections — mass electorates, secret voting, curbs on bribery, the equal distribution of seats according to population, single-member constituencies, party-based election campaigns — had emerged.

Glaring anomalies still remained, of course, including the exclusion of all women from the parliamentary vote and millions of poorer men falling foul of stringent residency and registration requirements. But in virtually all other respects a recognisably modern system had arrived. With these outstanding issues addressed, it would serve throughout the twentieth century and beyond.

Table 1 Key events and size of electorate, 1800–1900

Year	Key events in UK electoral history	Number of electors	Percentage of male adult population
1801	Union of Great Britain and Ireland	503,600	16%
1829	Catholic emancipation: Catholics allowed to become MPs but Irish county electorate reduced to provide 'securities'		
1831		497,200	11%
1832	'Great' Reform Act: new franchises and major redistribution of seats		
1833		811,500	18%
1850	Irish Franchise Act: restrictions on Irish county voters lifted		
1854	Corrupt Practices Act: attempts to prevent bribery		
1858	Property qualification for MPs abolished		
1866		1,364,000	20%
1867	Second Reform Act: new franchises and limited redistribution of seats		
1868		2,477,700	33%
1872	Ballot Act: end of voting in public		
1883	Corrupt Practices Act: limits on election expenditure and curbs on bribery	3,152,000	34%
1884	Third Reform Act: new franchises		
1885	Redistribution Act: single-member seats	5,708,000	62%
1900		6,730,900	60%

The number of voters

The facts and figures most commonly associated with the traditional 'road to democracy' view of the nineteenth century are listed in Table 1. There were three major Reform Acts, in 1832, 1867 and 1884–85. The expansion in the number of people who could vote after each of these is striking. By 1900 there were some 6 million extra voters compared with a century before. Since so many more people were able to vote, Britain was clearly becoming far more democratic. Or was it?

Recent work on the nineteenth century has begun to reveal a much more complex picture than these facts and figures indicate. It is now clear that far larger numbers of people were able to engage meaningfully in pre-democratic elections than is suggested by looking at voter numbers alone. Mid-Victorian elections, in particular, operated very differently to modern polls. They may not have been democratic in our modern sense, but it does not therefore follow that they were any less popular or participatory.

Plumping and splitting

Looking just at the size of the electorate tends to ignore other significant changes that were made to the business of voting in this period. It is often forgotten that before 1885 the vast majority of electors in England were entitled to vote more than once. In 1832, for instance, an astonishing 96% of English electors had two (or more) votes at their disposal, owing to the simple fact that most constituencies elected two (or more) MPs. One very significant upshot of this was that each elector could choose to use just one of their two votes, in a form of behaviour called 'plumping'. Alternatively they could opt to use both, either by supporting two candidates from the same party, casting 'straights', or by sharing their votes between rival candidates, 'splitting'.

As the size of the electorate increased after each Reform Act, however, the number of electors possessing these multiple votes dropped, as more and more English constituencies became single-member. Larger numbers of individuals could vote, certainly, but less often and without the range of voting choices previously available. Simply looking at the numbers who could vote rather neglects this important shift in what it actually meant to be a voter and participate in an election in the nineteenth century.

Nomination of candidates for Westminster at the hustings at Charing Cross, 1868 general election

The power of non-voters

In recent years, an increasing amount of attention has been paid to the role of non-electors in Victorian elections, most notably by historians of gender and class. It might seem odd to focus attention on those without the vote, but it makes far more sense when we consider the way early Victorian elections were actually held.

The evidence from newspaper accounts, personal diaries and contemporary pictures, including some fascinating early photographs, makes it clear that very large numbers of people usually attended the formal election proceedings, including the nomination, at which the candidates were proposed and made speeches, and the declaration, at which the result was announced. Unlike today, all these formalities invariably took place outdoors, with the candidates and their proposers taking centre stage on large temporary wooden platforms, called the 'hustings'. Huge processions of party supporters, accompanied by marching bands and flag bearers, were not uncommon. Many of the people who attended these events clearly had no vote, as the number of women who can be spotted in photographs of crowded hustings scenes makes abundantly clear. So why were they there?

A similar puzzle surrounds the importance that candidates themselves attached to non-electors. Rather than ignoring those without the vote, or politely indulging them, candidates actively sought to include non-electors in their campaigns, targeting them in their election addresses and even during the canvass. Some candidates even made a point of publishing election posters directed 'To the Electors and Non-Electors'. Again the reasons for wanting to do this have not really received the attention they deserve.

Two features of Victorian elections help to explain this inclusion and importance of non-electors: the public nature of voting and the availability of multiple votes. We will look at these in turn.

Ballot Act, 1872 This Act introduced the right of electors to cast their vote in private via the polling booth and ballot box. Prior to this, voters had to announce their preference in public in front of crowds of people.

virtual representation The idea that people could be indirectly represented by members of parliament and did not necessarily have to possess the vote to have representation. The argument was often used to justify the exclusion of women from the franchise, as it was stated that they were represented by their husbands, fathers and brothers.

exclusive dealing A practice whereby non-electors could wield influence by withdrawing their custom from shops and businesses that did not share their political preferences.

Questions

- What was the role of non-voters in the nineteenth-century electoral system?
- Who was able to vote in nineteenth-century England?
- Was nineteenth-century Britain a democracy?

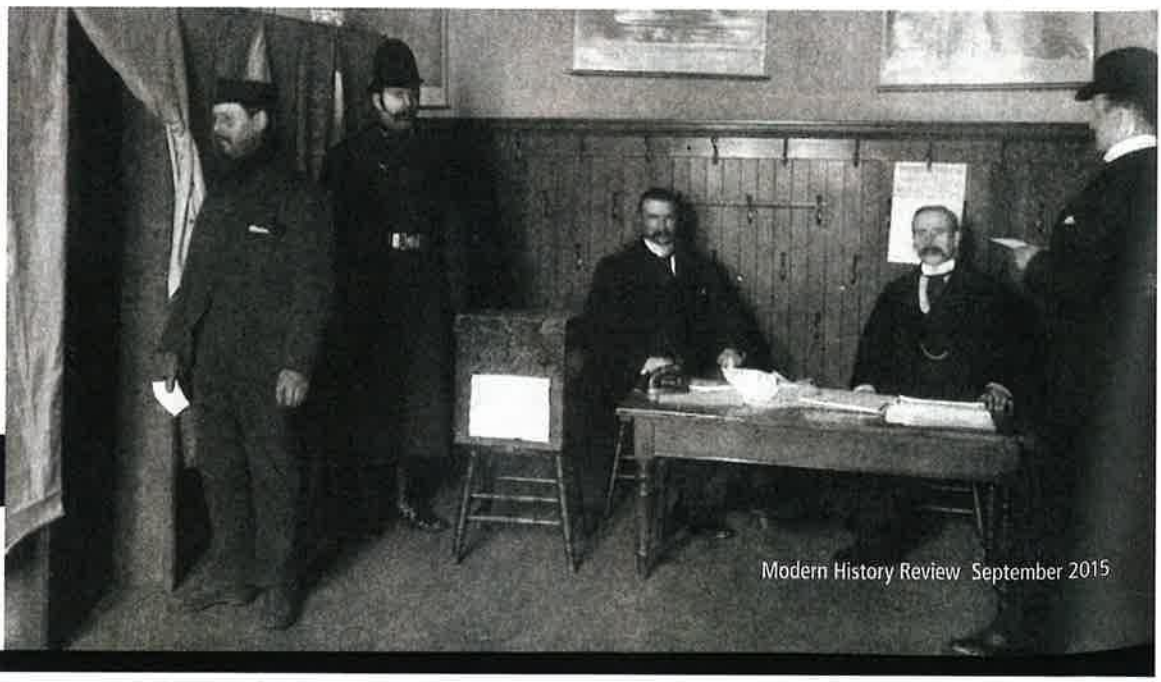
Public voting

Before the **Ballot Act** of 1872 all voting was performed in public, *viva voce*, rather than in secret — a practice that seems quite alien to modern observers. Voters not only had to openly declare their preference at the poll in person, before the official clerks, but also had to endure the public scrutiny of having their votes listed by the local press and published in poll books.

Rather than being excluded from the electoral process, therefore, non-electors could see how their neighbours were voting. As a result, they often played a significant and noisy role in trying to influence how they behaved. This practice, which amounted to a form of indirect or **virtual representation**, was considered perfectly acceptable and legitimate. As one candidate explained in 1841:

> The vote is public property, the elector is only a trustee, and you the non-electors have the right to scrutinize and to direct the exercise of the voters' function.

The influence exercised by non-electors could range from public meetings expressing popular support for particular candidates to more intimidating forms of persuasion. One widespread practice, termed **exclusive dealing**, was to threaten to boycott certain tradesmen or businesses. The Merthyr election of 1835, for instance, was settled entirely by such menaces. The theatrical tradition of calling for a 'show of hands' before the start of polling also provided non-electors with a crucial opportunity to express



Voting by secret ballot, c.1896

their opinion at a pivotal moment. Many a candidate, seeing the way the wind was blowing, opted to bail out at this point, rather than risk challenging the *vox populi*.

Of all the pressures brought to bear on voters by non-electors, however, it was the power exercised by women that was the most universally acknowledged. 'If the men have the votes, the women have the influence', declared the future prime minister Disraeli in his book *The Election*. In their various capacities as wives, mothers, sisters, mistresses, landladies and employers, women possessed an extraordinary capacity to shape the outcome of elections decided in a public voting system.

Reams of comments in surviving canvassing books along the lines of 'wife says he will vote', 'wife promised', or 'wife happy to be seen again' testify to women's ongoing importance. It was not unusual for some women to even frog-march their menfolk to the poll, much to everyone's amusement. Revealingly, when the Radical MP J. S. Mill tried unsuccessfully to give women the vote in 1867, one of the central arguments made against him was that they already possessed it, albeit indirectly. 'Everyone acquainted with elections was aware of the influence which was exercised by women', declared Tory MPs like Viscount Galloway.

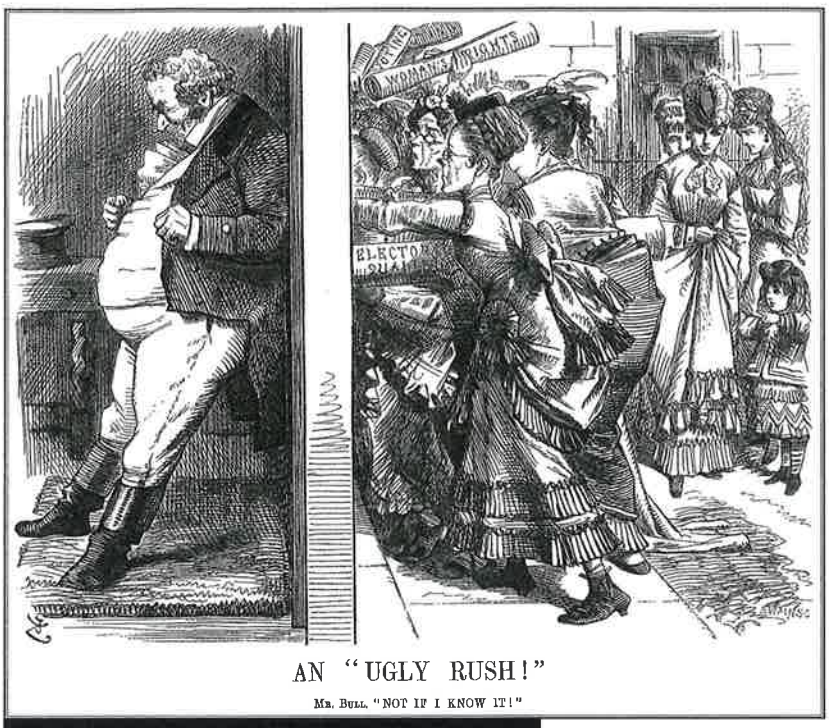
Multiple votes

None of the influences exercised by non-electors, including women, however, would have been as powerful or pervasive without a second very distinctive feature of mid-Victorian elections. This was the crucial ability mentioned earlier for many voters (especially in England) to cast more than one vote. It was far easier for electors to respond to the pressures of public voting, and to take into account the views of those without the franchise, when they had multiple votes at their disposal.

The prevalence of double-member seats, in particular, meant that many electors were able to use one of their votes for principle and the other to satisfy others. 'I always gave one vote for connexion, and the other I did what I liked with', explained one Totnes voter in 1867. As an 1851 report on voting in St Albans observed:

> There are a great many respectable voters in St Albans who usually vote, not strictly and not particularly with regard to any politics, but from a desire to serve friends and families in the town and neighbourhood...Many respectable voters... invariably divide their votes.

This combination of public voting on the one hand and multiple votes on the other underpinned an electoral system that was far better at accommodating popular opinion than has traditionally been allowed. It also goes a long way towards explaining why



Punch cartoon of 1870 depicting the rejection of the Woman's Vote Bill

so many ordinary people took an active interest in Victorian elections, even when they could not themselves vote. Non-electors turned up and became involved precisely because they could influence events and participate, in ways that just counting the official numbers on the electoral rolls simply ignores. Voters in this system were not just behaving as individuals, as electors do today, but also performing a very public duty on behalf of everyone else.

The end of indirect representation

The introduction of secret voting (1872) and move to single-member constituencies (1885 Redistribution Act) completely undermined this system of indirect representation. Voting now became a private rather than a public act, removing the ability of non-electors to scrutinise and influence the behaviour of those who were entitled to vote. At the same time, most voters now found themselves restricted to casting a single vote, since they could only elect one MP.

From this point onwards, the actual number who could vote in person clearly became far more important. It is perhaps no coincidence that it was around this time that the campaign for women's suffrage began to attract far more widespread attention and support.

Conclusion

So how accurate is it to think of the nineteenth century as a 'road to democracy'? Did the electoral reforms of this period really make Britain more democratic? Viewed from the perspective of the

Further reading

More information about Victorian elections can be found via the History of Parliament's blog at **https://victoriancommons.wordpress.com**. You can also explore the History of Parliament website: see **www.historyofparliamentonline.org**. There is a schools section providing materials and information on competitions.

electorate, where most historical attention has traditionally been focused, the simple answer is 'yes': far more people could vote after each of the Reform Acts of 1832, 1867 and 1884.

Looking at the experience of non-electors, however, reveals a rather different picture. Non-electors were clearly able to play a much more significant role in Britain's 'pre-democratic' voting system than has previously been recognised, participating in the public theatre of mid-Victorian polls and even influencing electoral outcomes.

By 1885, however, the entire basis of their involvement in this older type of representative system had been dismantled. Given that non-electors, including all women, continued to outnumber the enfranchised proportion of the adult population until well into the twentieth century, their experience cannot simply be overlooked. During the nineteenth century the 'majority' experience of Britain's electoral system — let's be democratic about it — was one of increasing exclusion rather than inclusion. How can this be seen as a 'road to democracy'?

Philip Salmon is the editor of the History of Parliament's 1832–1945 House of Commons project and the author of *Electoral Reform at Work* (2nd edn, 2011).

Using this article in your exam

A* exam focus

How might this topic come up in your exam?

OCR

This topic features in OCR AS Y140, From Pitt to Peel: Britain 1783–1853, and Y141, Liberals, Conservatives and the rise of Labour, 1846–1918. It features in the same units at A-level (Y110 and Y111 respectively).

At AS this paper contains two compulsory source-based questions worth a total of 30 marks and one essay question worth 20 marks. At A-level the paper requires you to answer a question related to four primary sources, worth 30 marks, as well as one essay question from a choice of two, worth 20 marks.

You can download a sample source annotation and commentary on this topic from: **www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras**

AQA

Nineteenth-century electoral reform features in AQA 1F, Industrialisation and the people: Britain, *c.*1783–1885, and 1G, Challenge and transformation: Britain, *c.*1851–1964.

At AS this paper demands that you answer a compulsory question which involves comparing and contrasting historical interpretations. It also requires you to complete an essay question from a choice of two.

At A-level this paper requires you to complete a compulsory question related to extracts taken from the views of historians. This question is worth 30 marks. You will also be required to complete two essay questions from a choice of three. These questions are worth 25 marks each.

A sample paragraph and assessor's commentary on this topic are available for download at: **www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras**

Edexcel

This topic features in Edexcel paper 1 option D, Britain 1785–1870: democracy, protest and reform. The paper is in three parts. Sections A and B require you to write one essay from a choice of two and section C is a compulsory question based on two extracts. All questions are worth 20 marks. Here is a sample essay question:

To what extent does the influence of political ideas, brought about through the French Revolution, explain the increasing demand for parliamentary reform in the years 1785–1832?

(20 marks)

The topic also features in paper 3 of the Edexcel A-level, option 36.1: Protest, agitation and parliamentary reform in Britain, 1780–1928. This paper is broken down into three sections. Section A is a compulsory question based on a source, while sections B and C both require you to write one essay from a choice of two. The paper is worth 60 marks, 20 for each question.

You can download an essay plan for a sample question on this topic at: **www.hoddereducation.co.uk/historyreviewextras**